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August 17, 2015

**Contemporary Art Practices and Discourses in Lebanon and Palestine:
2014 Travel Grant Report Submitted to the Aga Khan Program for Islamic
Architecture**

Overview

Thanks to the generosity of the Aga Khan Travel Grant, last summer I had the opportunity to travel to Lebanon and the West Bank in order to pursue preliminary research about contemporary art in the region, as well as to further knowledge of the Arabic language. Following a one-week trip to Beirut, where I attempted to familiarize myself with the city's many arts-related institutions, I continued my travels to Birzeit, Palestine, where I would be based for almost two months to improve my Arabic. A historic Christian and Muslim village just outside Ramallah, Birzeit is also home to Birzeit University, the leading Palestinian academic institution that hosts a Palestine and Arabic Studies Program for international students.

Though prior to the trip I had hoped to do a significant amount of fieldwork in investigating contemporary art (and its history) in Palestine and, to a lesser extent, Israel, given the fraught state of affairs caused by Operation Brother's Keeper and, subsequently, Operation Protective Edge, research proved more challenging than I had anticipated. In this way, I decided to devote my time to advancing my Arabic skills and developing writing projects based on the research I was pursuing and my daily life experiences in Birzeit.

Since returning to Boston and reflecting on these experiences in greater depth, I have actively been presenting a mix of academic, personal, and activist texts to different publics and in various forms, layering contemporary history, theory, criticism, and art, oftentimes alongside firsthand experience. Most currently, I am at work on reformulating one essay that I published for a small exhibition catalogue so that it can reach a larger audience in the art world. Tentatively titled "Notes on Peace/ Process/ Art," this piece unpacks each of these critical terms, providing what I consider to be an important theorization of contemporary arts practices and discourses emerging from Israel-Palestine in the past fifteen or so years. I am hugely thankful for last year's Aga Khan Travel Grant, without which, none of these projects would have been possible.

Contemporary Art in Beirut

Because it was my first time in Lebanon, this week-long segment of my trip seemed like a whirlwind. Forced to divide up my time between visiting sites and institutions and perusing archives and art, I tried to do and see as much as possible. In applying for this

grant, one of my foremost reasons to go to Lebanon before Israel-Palestine (rather than the other way around) was to catch part of the third edition of the Home Workspace Program (including lectures, workshops, and performances) at the Ashkal Alwan (Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts), a non-profit organization and research center that is a hub for the production and circulation of creative and intellectual endeavors. While lamentably the dates of the Home Workspace Program changed after I finalized my itinerary, I still was able to acquaint myself with the Ashkal Alwan as an institution through spending time at its library and archive. Here, I encountered a wealth of artistic and cultural material from contemporary Lebanon and the greater Arab world—books, journals, artist portfolios, conference proceedings—as well as rare audio-visual works that could be viewed or played. When I was visiting the archive, I was particularly keen on getting a sense of Beirut's recent history of sound art and experimental music—much of which is in dialogue with the Lebanese-Israeli conflict. Besides the Ashkal Alwan, I paid visits to other prominent contemporary arts institutions such as the Beirut Art Center, 98weeks, Ayyam Gallery, Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Art on 56th, ARTLAB, and Zico House. I was also able to catch the Lebanese Film Festival at the Metropolis Empire Sofil.

Although in the end I missed the Home Workspace programming, my trip happened to coincide with Beirut's rendition of International Archives Day. In other words, a number of archival institutions that are not normally open to the public—or that are often somewhat difficult to access—opened their doors and hosted special events, tours, lectures, screenings, and other programming. I was fortunate to have the chance to attend many of these institutions, including the Arab Image Foundation, the Archives and Special Collections Department at the University Libraries of the American University of Beirut, The Fouad Debbas Collection, the Institute for Palestine Studies, The Lebanese National Library, and Recto Verso Library.

Among the most memorable institutions to visit were the Arab Image Foundation and the Institute for Palestine Studies—both of which have fascinating histories and missions, as well as invaluable archives for the (art) historian. In addition to meeting with archivists and curators, I was able to spend time perusing the archives, paying close attention to collections surrounding the history of photography in the Ottoman Empire and under the British Mandate in pre-Nakba Palestine.

Birzeit University and the West Bank

I passed the bulk of my summer as a student at Birzeit University, where I was enrolled in Modern Standard Arabic classes. The fairly rigorous, rapid curriculum helped improve my abilities in reading, writing, and speaking Fusha—building on my one year of Arabic study at Harvard University. While I did not have time to take colloquial Arabic, I did meet weekly with a Palestinian language partner who studies at the university. Furthermore, I lived with a Palestinian housemate who works at Birzeit, and I had the pleasure of meeting and socializing with other Arabic-speakers and language-learners who were interested in Palestinian society and culture. In this way, my experience as a student at Birzeit supplied a nuanced understanding of what academic life is like at a

university under the Israeli occupation. The Palestine and Arabic Studies Program also organized a number of trips to different regions of the West Bank and organized a lecture series that often addressed topics related to history, human rights, culture, and politics. As a historian, I was especially intrigued by how the Palestinian academics and professionals articulated their historical narratives, embracing them to make sense of the present political moment.

To learn more about contemporary Palestinian art and culture, I visited a range of artistic and cultural centers and institutions in Ramallah, Jerusalem, and Bethlehem. Just down the road from where I was living was the construction site of the future Palestinian Museum, and I was able to meet with museum staff who were organizing the first exhibitions. Opening in 2016, the institution is considered the first modern historical museum in Palestine, one devoted to the preservation and celebration of Palestinian culture and society. Interestingly, Jack Persekian, the founding director of Anadiel Gallery which transformed into Al-Ma'mal Foundation as well as the Palestinian art biennial, the Qalandiya International, also serves as the director and lead curator at the Palestinian Museum. Persekian's considerable influence in the international art world is noteworthy as he embarks on a more vernacular project, one possibly geared towards a wider audience.

Other arts institutions (in varying forms of operation) that I enjoyed visiting included Al-Ma'mal, the A.M. Qattan Foundation, the International Academy of Art Palestine, and Riwaq Centre for Architectural Conservation.

I was also able to connect with Alessandro Petti, one of the founders of the Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency that is based in Beit Sahour, outside of Bethlehem. While this architecture and art collective and research center was not active in Palestine this summer, I visited and participated in a weekly workshop at one of Petti's related projects called Campus in Camps, an experimental collaborative educational program in Dheisheh refugee camp in Bethlehem.

As I articulated earlier, the scope of my research aspirations for the length of my stay shifted on account of the current events that unfolded in the West Bank, Israel, and Gaza. Because of the high level of violence throughout the West Bank and beyond, the period from late June to August was lamentably a poor time to engage in research. Frequently, cultural institutions closed their doors and cancelled events due to the ubiquitous alarm and necessity of mourning. We were often advised not to travel at all. On top of all this, the circumstances of Ramadan sometimes limited people's professional availabilities. Many people I tried to contact were on vacation and above all sensitive to their familial needs. For these reasons, I occupied myself with learning Arabic, writing, and reading.

Subsequent Writing Projects

Since returning to the United States following this admittedly trying yet vivid experience, I have been busy composing and performing a couple of texts that incorporate historical, contemporary, and personal material. All of these works draw on my experience and

research in and about Israel-Palestine. Here are two examples of texts that I hope to develop further.

I was invited to give a text at the “Here, Without: Art, Otherness, and Israel-Palestine” conference at Harvard University in January 2015. As a part of a year-long project by thesis student Ethan Pierce, the conference brought together a range of esteemed artists, activists, art historians, and editors to present on different subjects related to art and activism in Israel-Palestine. Titled “I Am Not a Camera,” my piece circled around the concept of martyrdom—in the contemporary Palestinian and Israeli senses as well as historically, martyrdom as witnessing. Through examining martyrdom as a critical term in relation to ethics, politics, and aesthetics, I carried out a scattered investigation of martyrs, past and present, especially as they intersect with queer issues. Rather than a comprehensive essay, this piece interwove reflections on history, theory, literature, and criticism with my personal experience from the summer.

“Here, Without” also produced a catalogue of student artworks as well as a couple critical essays. I contributed one text called “Notes on Peace/ Process/ Art” that parses out each of these terms in relation to one another, ultimately sketching out a theorization of “peace process art.” This is a unique attempt to ruminate on what happens when we consider contemporary Israeli and Palestinian art alongside each other. What is at stake ethically and politically when we assume that the hyphen between Israel-Palestine signals a symmetry? How is contemporary arts discourse and practice thoroughly entangled in the geopolitical situation? How does art serve the interests of “peace process” logics? These are all questions I raise and investigate in this piece.

Conclusions

Even though I do not plan to write a dissertation on the subject of Israel-Palestine, my research on this topic is far from over. The Aga Khan Travel Grant offered me an unparalleled opportunity to research contemporary art and improve my Arabic in the Middle East. My stays in Beirut and Birzeit were tremendously useful for pushing my thinking about art, history, and politics—and I am certain that these experiences will only continue to inform my academic and personal pursuits.